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ABSTRACT

The historical rhetoric, mythic heroes, and values of the American Revolution have become the justification for many other contemporary "revolutions." Collective movements advocating states' independence, the abolition of slavery, women's rights, civil rights, and so on, have manipulated the concept of heroic equality as it is embodied in the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and other Revolutionary documents to conform to their own ideologies and self-interests. Thus, American values become part of an ongoing revolution in which old ideals are translated into new political attitudes and trends. (KS)

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THE ON-GOING REVOLUTION:
RHETORIC, FANTASY, AND VESTED INTEREST

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This bicentennial year has reminded many of us that the patriotic ancestors sacrificed that we might enjoy bountiful luxuries of republican freedom. Each evening Shell Oil Company offers a brief glimpse of "200 Years Ago Today" to remind us that events of heroic importance happened each day in the months leading up to the Declaration of Independence and through the early war years. This intensity of advertising, marketing, and community activity amplifies what is a normal part of each individual's socialization process. From early childhood, through our school years, and from books, TV programs, and movies, we encounter the patriotic ancestors in various forms and guises. Often we encounter more fantasy than fact, but the encounters serve an important sociological function. Through these encounters with our patriotic ancestors, we attach to them epic, heroic significance, and around them we create a fantasy of tradition laden with values and principles of the highest order.

The metaphor of an unfinished or on-going revolution is a logical extension of the zeal of patriotic fantasy. Implicit in the metaphor is the notion that the principles of freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness have drawn this nation toward some singular goal. As such, the people of the nation collectively seek to share in the luxuries of these ideals. As if by the entelechial power of these basic principles, citizens following the example of the founding fathers, have collectively, but not without

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turmoil, sought the realization of these concepts into the legal and institutional fabric of our society.

A weakness in the metaphor of an on-going revolution is immediately spotted when one considers the struggle in 1776 as a war of independence rather than as a revolutionary war. Rather than a revolution of spirit and new ideals, the war is described essentially as one people finding rationalization for separating from another people. The harshness implicit in the contrast between a revolution and a war of independence characterizes the paradoxes to be found when setting out to discover whether an unfinished revolution is on-going and whether it is going in a particular direction. Catherine Drinker Bowen described the tenseness with which John Adams and Thomas Jefferson listened to the debate on the preamble of the Declaration of Independence; "all men are created equal was a hard morsel for patrician landholders to swallow."[1]

Another weakness in the on-going revolution metaphor occurs when one sees competing factions in society using the same values, drawn from the revolutionary fantasy, as the rhetorical axioms supporting their movement's ideals. Given the pliancy of the value structure in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, vested interests on the liberal and conservative ends of the political spectrum draw rhetorical axioms from the same sources, these documents and the fantasies of the heroic founding fathers.

A glaring example of this rhetorical paradox is found by comparing the rationale for revolution advanced by H. Rap Brown and by the Ku Klux Klan. Brown drew upon the heroic myth of the founding fathers to characterize and legitimize the revolutionary stance he advocated. For him, "the question of violence has been cleared up. This country was born of violence. Violence is as American

as cherry pie."[2] Because of the pliancy of the heroic fantasy, the K.K.K. also found historic precendence for revolution as means for achieving their ends. To justify rebellion against a tyrannical federal government, they drew from Jefferson who said, "'God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion.... What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? What country can preserve its liberty if the rulers are not warned from time to time that the people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms; the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of tyrants.' That's what Thomas Jefferson said--he was as much a Klan as anybody in the country--that's what we said, too."[3] Through rhetorical application of the heroic myth, Jefferson becomes a spokesman for the Klan.

In similar fashion, Malcolm X characterized the heroic stature of the founding fathers: "If George Washington didn't get independence for this country nonviolently, and if Patrick Henry didn't come up with a nonviolent statement, and you taught me to look upon them as patriots and heroes, then it's time for you to realize that I have studied your books well."[4]

Through the rhetorical use of heroic figures, if "one lifts up himself by erecting a hero, factional mud-slinging must always interfere with the completion of legendary magic."[5] In our national heritage, few figures have heroic stature comparable to that of the founding fathers. Their heroic stature passed through fantasy from generation to generation eventuates in mythic proportion. The founding fathers are sublimely sagacious, astute in political judgment, and most importantly, concerned about the extension of civil liberty to the consideration at hand. So substantial is the fantasy of the heroic myth, that few social movements seeking extensions or

limitations of civil liberties can long exist without rhetorical reference to these figures.

The question of factual accuracy is not as important as is the mythic figure's ability to objectify the intangible, indefinable, and elusive nature of fundamental principles. Myth serves not as direct reflection of objective reality, but as a "flagrant contradiction to it. It seems to build upon an entirely fantastic world."[6] Rather than being an accurate description of reality, myth objectifies reality, thereby becoming despite misconception, reality itself. Since the myth cannot, and probably would not, be tested for accuracy, its rhetorical importance arises because it "is in a sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational arguments; it cannot be refuted by syllogisms."[7]

The rhetorical problem arises from a matrix of self-interested struggles for power, privilege, and protection threatened by or guaranteed by founding fathers who erected certain transcendent ideals. These transcendent ideals were encompassed into the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. So used, "a constitution is a substance--and as such, it is a set of motives."[8] The transcendent ideals by necessity are abstract, ill-defined, and nebulous. They serve as benchmarks to define those who share in the rewards of society and to differentiate them from those who don't. The on-going revolution is a rhetorical struggle predicated on the dialectical alternative of exclusion/inclusion and justified by rhetorical attachments of actions to the fantasies and myths recurrent in the application or denigration of the founding fathers' wisdom.

The Constitution and other fundamental documents serve in carrot-from-stick fashion to draw vested interests, often in conflict with other vested interests, toward the reification of the summa-

tional principles into support for the vested interest. Because summational principles are formed into documents and because vested interests seek certain goals, there is a "kind of 'terministic compulsion' to carry out the implication of one's terminology."[9] Thus, the rhetorical implications of the on-going revolution focus on the question of how the values will be implemented rather than which values should be implemented.

The rhetorical problem of the advocates for the vested interest is locating the means for applying the central values to the vested interest. The rhetorical impetus comes from attaching their cause, directly or indirectly, with the principles of the founding fathers. Indirectly, Frederick Douglass contrasted the paradox of slavery in a democratic society. In his criticism of the paradox between the stated principle and the institutional policy, he observed that "the signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men, too--great enough to give frame to a great age." "They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage." "With them, justice, liberty and humanity were 'final'; not slavery and oppression." "Washington could not die till he had broken the chains of his slaves." The heroic myth set the standard of justice against which Douglass contrasted the plight of black people: "The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me."[10]

Antislavery advocate, William Wells Brown asked the audience to consider, as a premise against slavery, the inconsistency between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: "The one declaring that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the other is the history

of the encroachment of slavery upon liberty, or legislation in favor of slavery in that country against the cause of freedom."[11]

As is characteristic of the paradox of applying the heroic myth, parties on both sides of the same issue apply the fantasy as axioms from which to rationalize their action. Although differing from Douglass and Brown on the slavery issue, Vice president of the Confederacy, Alexander H. Stephens essentially agreed on the constitutional question. "The prevailing ideas entertained by him (Thomas Jefferson) and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution were, that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically." The fathers approached the issue "upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error." To correct this error, the Confederate Constitution--based on the U.S. Constitution--encompassed the heroic values, but was founded on the cornerstone of slavery.[12] By the extension of this logic, the civil war and the founding of the Confederacy were corrective measures seeking to perfect the fundamental documents of the land. To accomplish this task, the heroic fathers' error must be acknowledged and corrected.

Like other groups, women advocating changes in policy affecting their lives suggest that the heroic fathers supplied precedent for action favoring civil liberty and supplied principle upon which all people, men and women, should be treated as equals. The heroic fathers spoke through Elizabeth Cady Stanton when she reacted to women who did not want to vote. "When I hear American women, descendents of Jefferson, Hancock and Adams, say they do not want to vote, I feel that the blood of the revolutionary heroes must long since have ceased to flow in their veins."[13] The spirit of concerted

action in behalf of civil rights, in the name of the Declaration of Independence, is the expectation of those following the fantasy of the heroic myth. How unlike the founding fathers is one disinterested in achieving equal access to the vote.

Susan B. Anthony captured the spirit of the Declaration of Independence in her speaking tour in 1873. To her the "facts also prove that, by all the great fundamental principles of our free government, not only married women but the entire womanhood of the nation are in a 'condition of servitude' as surely as were our Revolutionary fathers when they rebelled against King George." Are women included in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence? She answered: "It was we, the people, not we, the white male citizens, nor we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed this Union." Like the founding fathers, the souls of disfranchised women were enflamed by the injustices of unequal treatment. Like Adams, Hancock or Henry, a "justice-loving woman's" "soul would be fired with all the indignation of 1776 every time the tax-collector presents himself at her door."[14]

In 1948, during the struggle between the NAACP and the States Rights Democratic Party, both sides found historical precedence for supporting or opposing the proposed civil rights act. The issue was whether the principles which the heroic fathers formed into the basic documents applied to black people or not. Advocates for both sides of the controversy searched the heroic myth for support. Based on the belief that the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution could be protected only by protest, a faction of southern Democrats walked out of the Democratic national convention and formed the States Rights Democratic Party. The Party was committed to preserving the basic documents as implemented

"during the administrations of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Jackson."[15]

A similar contest transpired when the 1964 Civil Rights Act was debated. Martin Luther King observed that "when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalianable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[16] King wrote from the Birmingham Jail that "one day the South will recognize its real heroes." "One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence."[17]

George Wallace, representing the counterposition, did not see the issue as did King. The Civil Rights Bill was, he argued, a "fraud, sham, and hoax." At the Southeastern Fairground in Atlanta, on July 4, 1964, he assured the audience that "We come here today in deference to the memory of those stalwart patriots who on July 4, 1776, pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to establish and defend the proposition that governments are created by the people, empowered by the people, derive their just powers from the consent of the people, and must forever remain subservient to the will of the people." On this occasion, he encouraged the audience to "find inspiration and determination and courage to preserve and protect the great principles of freedom enunciated in the

Declaration of Independence." "This bill will live in infamy. To sign it into law at any time is tragic. To do so upon the eve of the celebration of our independence insults the intelligence of the American people."[18]

The agitational efforts of these vested interests aim toward norm-oriented goals. This means that they assume that the transcendent values are correct and, therefore, seek to incorporate the values into norms favoring the members of the vested interest.[19] Emphasizing the distinction, Neil Smelser concludes that "value strain poses the issue of commitment; normative strain concerns the integration of human interaction."[20] The values in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the reification of these ideals through the heroic myth impel individuals toward these goals. In the name of the transcendent terms, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness, the effort of the vested interest is to assert norms reflecting the values which are favorable to followers.

In the dialectic of vested interests competing for application of the fundamental principles, the dialectic is between competing norms rather than competing values. Because the struggle is at the normative level, it is not dialectically simple: Liberty vs. freedom, which would constitute a value-oriented movement, but one group's liberty vs. another group's. This conflict is between the vested interests' normative application of existing values.

Liberty has a polar opposite in the concept of slavery or non-liberty. However, the on-going revolution posits polar opposition between my liberty and your liberty, my equality and your equality, and my pursuit of happiness and your pursuit of happiness. Translated into the reality of a dialectical wrangle, the efforts of the slave to achieve liberty are in polar opposition to the slave owner's

liberty to maintain slaves.

Thus, the locus of the rhetorical problem is not liberty vs. oppression, but the liberty of one vested interest polarly opposed to that of another. The freedom achieved by some may necessarily be achieved by the dialectically countervailing loss of freedom by others. The acquiring of freedom from slavery displaces the freedom to enslave. The acquiring of freedom for self-determination by women displaces the freedom of men to be the sole family decision makers.

Whether George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, or John Adams shared equally the housework with their wives or whether they sought equal employment and affirmative action for women is not the essential issue. What is important is the conception of heroic equality. The founding fathers' legacy, through the fantasies of socialization, provide axiomatic normative basis for extending and insuring equal treatment in this decade.

The revolution is unfinished. It will likely never be finished, at least as long as people form themselves into groups which express comonly shared views. We cannot fully appreciate the struggles which persist in this country in the names of the founding fathers until we see that the conflict of our times, as well as that of the past and of the future, as a struggle between vested interests.

We look for a central commitment to ideals which have emanated from the founding fathers in order to characterize the development of the past two hundred years. Like Madison feared when he wrote in the Federalist Papers,[21] the nature of society is such that individuals find it necessary to create collective associations to foster shared self-interests. As long as they do not share in the riches of the land or find policies which do not agree with their values, a

tendancy persists to band into associations and to create motives to lure others into a collective movement aimed at recreating the nation as a new version of an old ideal.

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